

NLC NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

A CENTURY OF STRENGTHENING CITIES

Strengthening the Municipal Role in Child and Family Well-Being

SHARED PRIORITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

Every child should have the opportunity to grow up safe, supported, and surrounded by people who care about them. But too many children and families face challenges that can make this difficult, including unstable housing, financial stress, and limited access to mental health, education, and other support. For families already under stress, getting help can be difficult, and problems can quickly become crises. Without the right support at the right time, families may become involved with the foster care system.

Cities can play an important role in addressing these challenges by helping families get the support they need earlier, through both prevention and support. **While child welfare is most often not directly under city jurisdiction, it greatly affects resident well-being both for families directly involved as well as the entire community.** Cities can employ multiple approaches to ensuring families stay together safely and that they have the supports when foster care is necessary.

Introduction

To better understand how cities can support children, youth, and families impacted by foster care, NLC's Pathways & Funding and Cities of Opportunity programs, with support from the Doris Duke Foundation, convened mayors, municipal leaders, child welfare professionals, and community partners for Reimagining Local Support for Foster Youth: A Mayoral Convening on the Role of Local Leadership. Participating cities included: Alexandria, Va.; Baltimore, Md.; Frederick, Md.; Gary, Ind.; Lauderhill, Fl.; Mount Vernon, NY; and Roanoke, Va. The convening explored how local governments can contribute to prevention, family preservation, housing stability, and cross-sector collaboration, even when foster care systems are administered at the state or county level. Findings from a pre-convening NLC survey helped shape the discussion by identifying key priorities, challenges, and opportunities related to mental health, service coordination, partnerships, and funding.

FOSTER CARE

The foster care system provides temporary care for children who cannot safely remain with their parents or caregivers because of abuse, neglect, or family crisis. The goal is to keep children safe while supporting families in addressing the challenges that led to foster care and, whenever possible, help children return home. Most children are placed with foster families or relatives who provide a safe and stable home while parents work with child welfare agencies to strengthen their families. Nearly 329,000 children were in foster care across the United States in 2024, relying on foster families, relatives, and community supports while working toward reunification, guardianship, adoption, or another permanent living arrangement.[1]



Foster Care as a City Issue

> If you create programs that help children, you ultimately help children from many different circumstances"
>
> **MAYOR MICHAEL O'CONNOR**, Frederick, MD

Children and families involved in foster care often face multiple, interconnected challenges. Many families enter the child welfare system when they are already struggling with housing, financial resources, or access to basic supports. In 2025, neglect was the top reason children were removed from their homes, accounting for 55 percent of placement cases, followed by caretaker drug abuse (29%) and physical abuse (13%) as the next most common causes for removal.[2]

Children are often experiencing trauma and frequently have unmet mental health needs. Many face even steeper challenges as they grow older, including high rates of mental health diagnosis and post-traumatic stress, lower high school graduation and post-secondary attainment, and high rates of both victimization and arrests. By early adulthood, they are more likely to be underemployed and earn less than their peers, with up to 46 percent experiencing homelessness by age 26.[3]

Foster care is not only a child welfare issue. It is also connected to many challenges that cities address every day.



Housing Instability

Housing instability is closely connected to child welfare involvement. Approximately one in ten children entering foster care are removed from their families at least partly because of inadequate housing, highlighting how access to safe, stable housing can help prevent family separation and promote family well-being.[4]

Jurisdictional Uncertainty (Unclear Roles)

The role of cities in foster care varies across the country. In some communities, cities have a direct role. In others, foster care is managed primarily by the state or county. This can make it difficult for city leaders to know where they can help, who they should work with, and how their existing resources connect to the child welfare system. However, cities such as New York City and Los Angeles have demonstrated how local leaders can improve outcomes through cross-system partnerships, prevention investments, housing initiatives, and targeted supports for youth and kinship families.[5] They and other cities are focused on areas where cities already have authority instead of trying to solve jurisdictional issues by changing who administers foster care.

CITY SNAPSHOT

Baltimore, Maryland

Baltimore operates within a state-administered framework in which federal and state-funded child welfare services are managed by the state-staffed Baltimore City Department of Social Services (BCDSS). Committed to an ecosystem for resident wellbeing, in 2019 the City established the Mayor's Office of Children and Family Success (MOCFS) to construct an intentional, city-led safety net for children and families facing social challenges. This comprehensive approach augments state services for children and families at risk or involved with the child welfare system. The city directs local assets straight into neighborhoods through five Community Action Partnership (CAP) Centers—multi-generational stabilization hubs co-locating early learning networks, emergency relief, and housing assistance.

Mayor Brandon Scott has championed expanded resources and impact for these efforts, including expanded access to family-strengthening early care and education, which also includes city-administered programs like Baltimore City Head Start which prioritizes enrollment for children in foster and kinship care. Mayor Scott's administration also supports dedicated pathways for aging-out youth through municipal housing vouchers and workforce pipelines like "Earn As You Grow". By centering city hall's convening power around family preservation, Baltimore demonstrates how mayoral commitment can transform siloed municipal resources into family- and community-centered networks of support.





Fragmented Systems

Families often rely on multiple systems, including housing, education, healthcare, employment, and child welfare that do not consistently coordinate. This fragmentation can leave families navigating complex systems on their own, creating gaps and delays in accessing support before challenges become crises. Better coordination can make it easier for families to find the help they need and reduce the need to navigate multiple systems on their own.

Workforce and Resource Constraints

Gaps in community resources can create additional challenges for families seeking support. Shortages in staffing, funding, and workforce capacity can reduce access to critical mental health, substance use, and family support services leading to increased risk of abuse and neglect and ultimately lifelong trauma. By strengthening the network of professionals serving children and families, and community organizations that help families access critical support services, local government can help families address challenges earlier, reduce the likelihood of family disruption, and improve outcomes for youth as they move into adulthood.

Why City Leadership Matters

> Improving foster care systems is important to me because I believe deeply that every child deserves stability, opportunity, and a community that believes in them. That is why city leaders have an important role to play in bringing people and resources together to help children and families thrive."

MAYOR ALYIA GASKINS, City of Alexandria, VA

What We Heard from Cities

Insights from the NLC mayoral convening on Reimagining Local Support for Foster Youth mirror findings from a survey of NLC member networks that indicated cities should play a larger role in supporting family well-being and in preventing children from going into foster care.

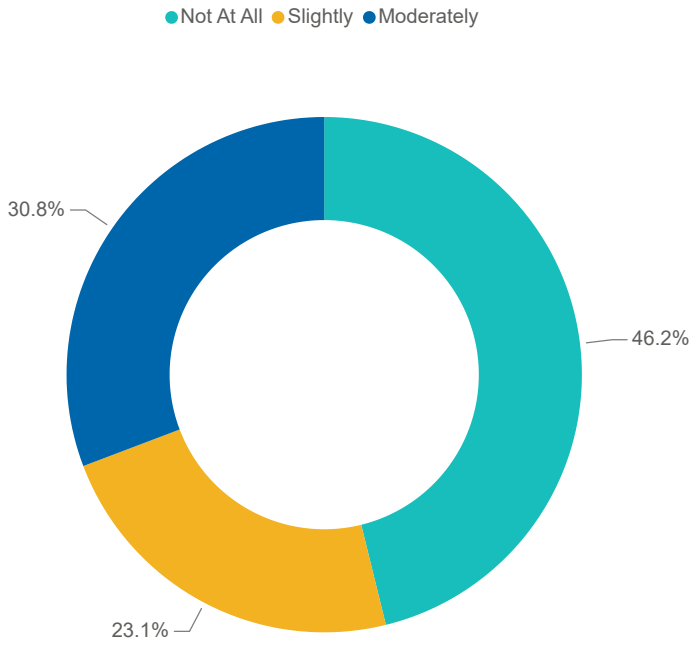
Mayors participated in the convening because they have seen firsthand how family instability and foster care involvement affect children, families, and communities. While their local contexts differed, many shared a personal commitment to helping families access support before challenges become crises.

Survey respondents also identified unclear roles, limited access to information and data, and housing challenges as key concerns. Together, these findings suggest that city leaders want to do more, but many need greater clarity about where they can make a difference and how to work with state and county child welfare systems.

FIGURE 1

Current Foster Care Systems Are Not Meeting City Needs

PERCENTAGE (%) OF RESPONDENTS, BY RESPONSE TO IF SYSTEM IS MEETING NEEDS



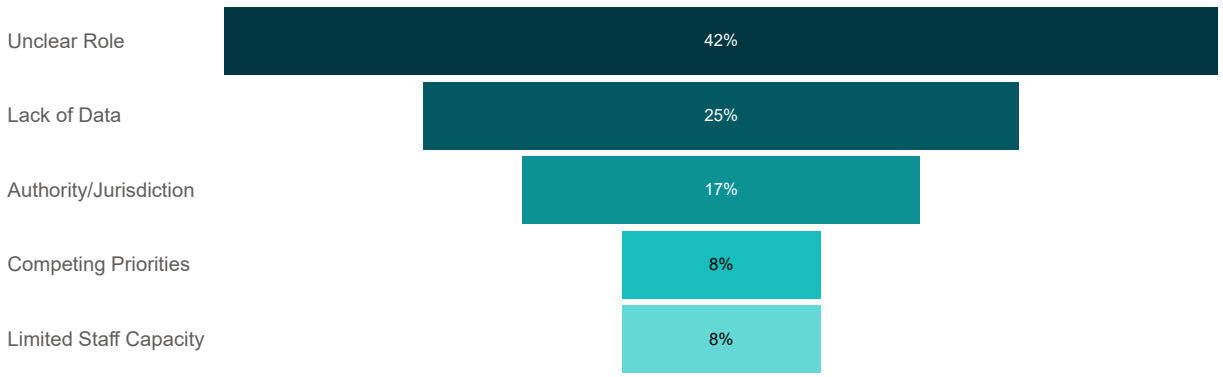
Source: Survey responses from 2026 NLC member survey (n=29).

Note: No responses were captured for "Extremely Well" or "Very Well".

FIGURE 2

Unclear Role is the Highest Barrier to Municipal Engagement for Foster Care

PERCENTAGE (%) OF RESPONDENTS, BY BARRIER TO ENGAGEMENT

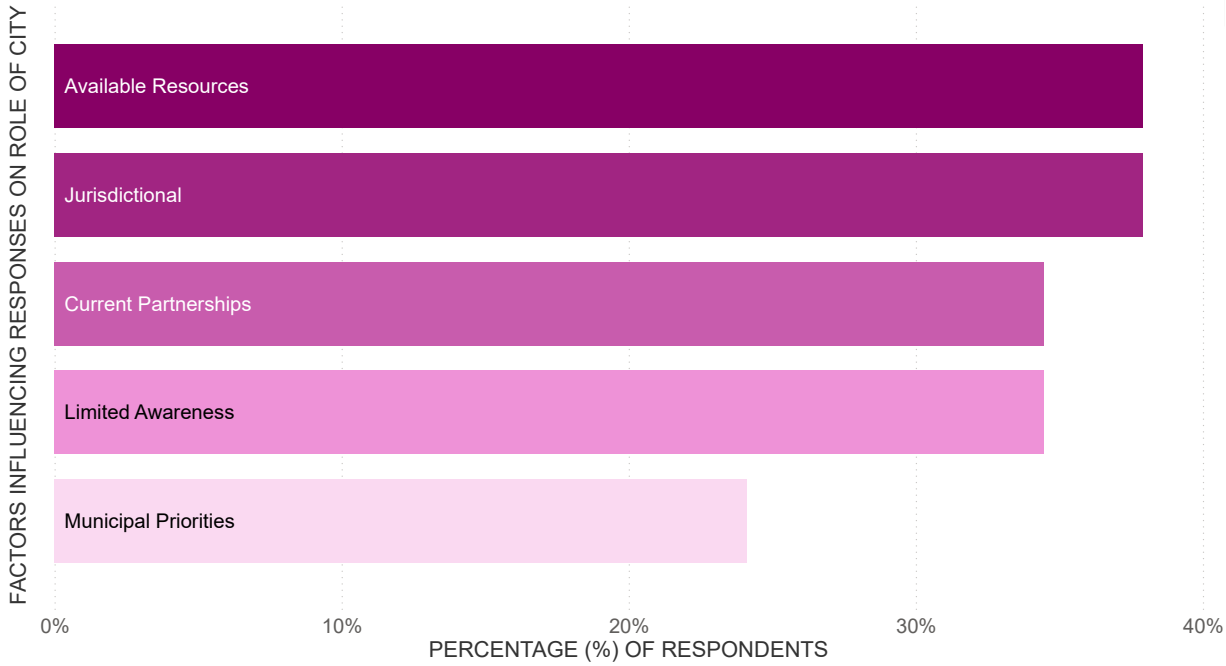


Source: Survey responses from 2026 NLC member survey (n=29).

FIGURE 3

Available Resources and Jurisdictional Role Have Strongest Influence on Perceptions of Municipal Role in Foster Care

PERCENTAGE (%) OF RESPONDENTS, BY FACTOR INFLUENCING PERCEPTIONS OF MUNICIPAL ROLE

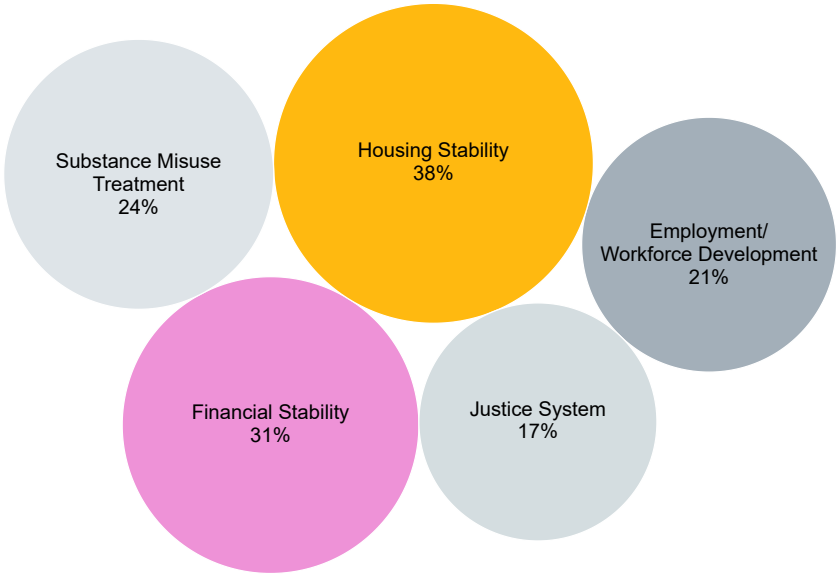


Source: Survey responses from 2026 NLC member survey (n=29).
Note: Survey respondents were allowed to select multiple responses resulting in columns adding to more than 100%.

FIGURE 4

Housing Stability is the Number 1 Issue in Supporting Foster Youth

PERCENTAGE (%) OF RESPONDENTS, BY FACTOR MOST IMPORTANT FOR SUPPORTING YOUTHS



Source: Survey responses from 2026 NLC member survey (n=29).
Note: Survey respondents were allowed to select multiple responses resulting in columns adding to more than 100%.

Recurring Themes

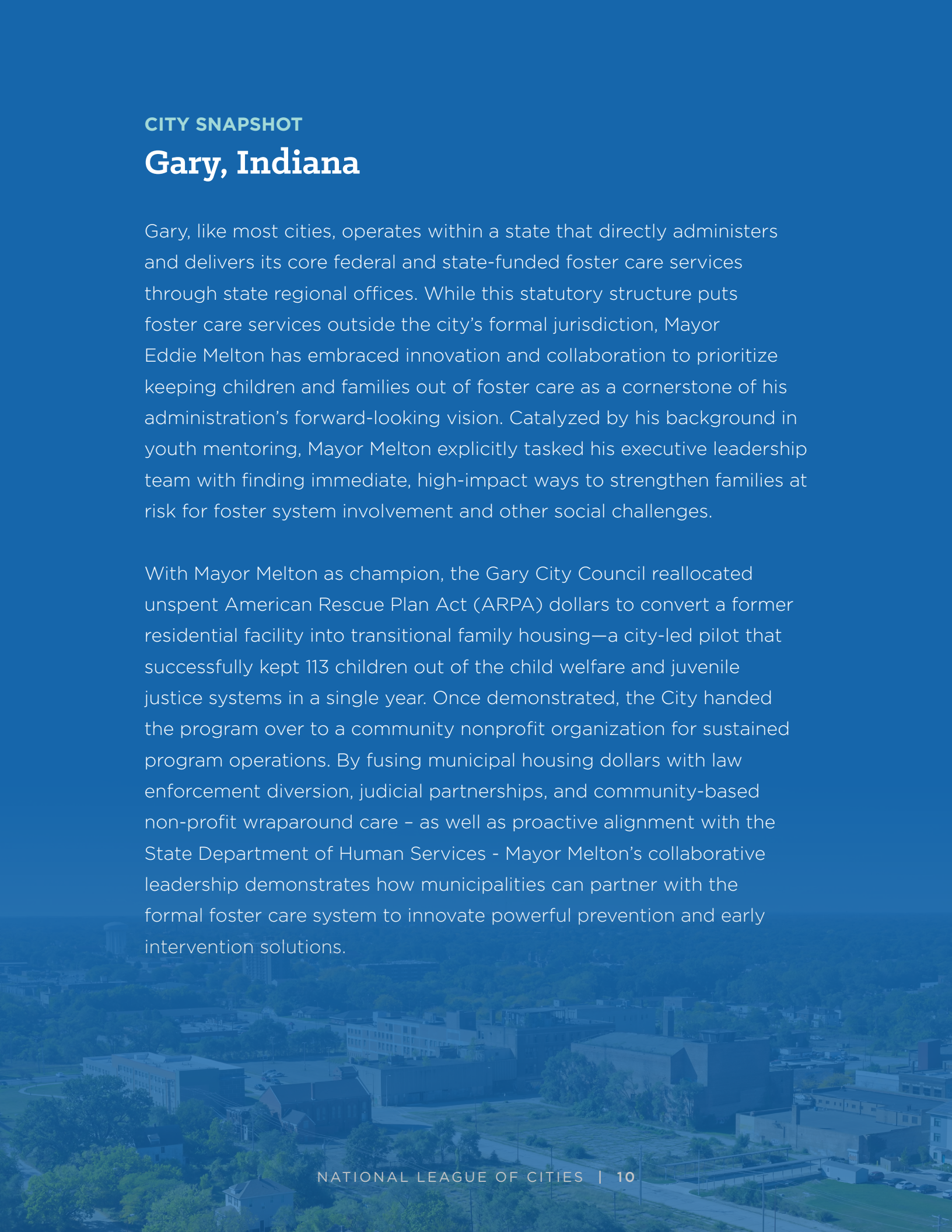
Discussions during the convening revealed several recurring themes related to strengthening outcomes for children, youth, and families. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of collaboration, prevention, and supporting families before crises occur. Kinship care emerged as a key way to stabilize families, alongside discussions about behavioral health, workforce challenges, caregiver support, and better coordination across systems. Similar to findings from the NLC member network survey, housing insecurity emerged as one of the most pressing challenges identified by participants in both the convening and the survey.

CITY SNAPSHOT

Gary, Indiana

Gary, like most cities, operates within a state that directly administers and delivers its core federal and state-funded foster care services through state regional offices. While this statutory structure puts foster care services outside the city's formal jurisdiction, Mayor Eddie Melton has embraced innovation and collaboration to prioritize keeping children and families out of foster care as a cornerstone of his administration's forward-looking vision. Catalyzed by his background in youth mentoring, Mayor Melton explicitly tasked his executive leadership team with finding immediate, high-impact ways to strengthen families at risk for foster system involvement and other social challenges.

With Mayor Melton as champion, the Gary City Council reallocated unspent American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars to convert a former residential facility into transitional family housing—a city-led pilot that successfully kept 113 children out of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems in a single year. Once demonstrated, the City handed the program over to a community nonprofit organization for sustained program operations. By fusing municipal housing dollars with law enforcement diversion, judicial partnerships, and community-based non-profit wraparound care – as well as proactive alignment with the State Department of Human Services - Mayor Melton's collaborative leadership demonstrates how municipalities can partner with the formal foster care system to innovate powerful prevention and early intervention solutions.





How Cities Can Make a Difference

> Children who cannot find family placements in Frederick must leave the community, which is a community failure"

Debbie Marini, Frederick County, MD.
DIRECTOR OF FREDERICK COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES.

What can mayors and municipal governments do to strengthen families and prevent unnecessary foster care involvement, especially when the formal child welfare system is operated by a county or state?

City leaders can help families find support before problems become crises. They oversee many programs that strengthen family well-being and can also bring together organizations that may not otherwise work together. Mayors and city leaders can connect schools, housing providers, health care organizations, child welfare agencies, community groups, philanthropy, and families around shared goals. By connecting resources and people, cities can identify service gaps and improve coordination, making it easier for families to find the help they need and reducing the burden of navigating multiple systems on their own.

CITY SPOTLIGHT

Roanoke, Virginia

Roanoke is one of relatively few cities that is authorized by its state to administer core federally- and state-funded foster care services. It has seized this opportunity to align these resources to its municipal priorities for a holistic approach through its Department of Social Services to strengthen children, youth and families involved in the child welfare system. Mayor Joe Cobb embodies and drives this priority, grounding city strategy in an ethos where child welfare is approached with a personal commitment to "love, encouragement, and creating a safe, stable home environment". While Roanoke faces a high rate of foster care placements alongside state-leading adoption numbers, the city leverages local Kinship Connect networks to keep children safely anchored with relative caregivers.

For older youth, the mayor's office aligns municipal health and housing resources with trusted regional partners – such as Impact Living Services and HopeTree Family Services – delivering dedicated transitional housing beds, life-skills coaching, and independent living stipends. In addition to providing as much support as possible for foster-involved families, Mayor Cobb's administration is proactively championing an upstream shift to preserve families before removalhighest impact on child, youth and family wellbeing.





Five Shared Priorities for Local Action

> Kinship care is prevention work"
>
> **KRISTI BURRE**, Kinnect

Today, child welfare is undergoing a profound shift toward prevention, kinship care, and proactive transition support. Policymakers and practitioners now recognize that effective solutions require comprehensive, person-centered resources including housing, healthcare, workforce development, and social support. The system is focused on keeping children out of foster care and making sure those who are in the system can transition to successful adulthood. A participant of the convening from Kinnect, a nonprofit organization that supports kinship caregivers and connects families to resources and peer support, noted that about 100 to 150 family connections can often be identified within days of a child's involvement with the system and emphasized that kinship care is prevention work.*

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* Kristi Burre, Chief Strategy Officer, Kinnect.org (National League of Cities, Reimagining Foster Care convening, July 21, 2026)

The convening highlighted **five areas** where cities can make a difference.

Start with Prevention

Participants stressed the importance of helping families before they reach a crisis. Cities can invest in early childhood programs, family support, and other services that address challenges before child welfare involvement is needed. Prevention also means addressing the conditions that can put families under stress, including housing instability, financial hardship, and limited access to health and behavioral health services.



Leadership

Strong local leadership drives systems change and better outcomes for youth and families.

Prevention Starts in the Community

Participants described increasing investments in early childhood education, family stabilization services, addressing social determinants of health, etc.

Partnerships Drive Better Outcomes

Participants called for municipalities to serve as conveners that bring together stakeholders who may not otherwise work collaboratively.

Kinship and Family Connections Matter

Participants consistently emphasized keeping children connected to family, kin, and community whenever possible and increasing awareness and support for kinship caregivers.

Youth And Families Must Help Shape Solutions

Participants recommend cities elevate the voices of those most directly impacted by the foster care system.

Housing, Behavioral Health, and Workforce Supports are Critical Foundations

Participants highlighted the need for stable housing, accessible behavioral health care, and workforce opportunities.

Bring Partners Together

No single organization can meet all of a family's needs. Cities can bring together organizations that do not always work together. Better coordination can help

connect services, reduce gaps, and make it easier for families to get help. Cities are well positioned to serve as conveners because they work across many areas that affect family well-being.

Keep Families and Communities Connected

Participants emphasized the importance of keeping children connected to their families, relatives, and communities whenever possible. Cities can help increase awareness of and support for kinship caregivers, family members and others who care for children when parents cannot. While child welfare systems typically administer kinship care, cities can play an important role by supporting caregivers, coordinating services, and reducing barriers that help relatives provide stable homes for children. Strong family and community connections can give children greater stability and a stronger sense of belonging.

Listen to Youth and Families

Young people and families who have experienced foster care should have a voice in shaping solutions. Their experiences can help city leaders understand what is working, where services are falling short, and what needs to change. Including these voices can also help cities design programs that better reflect what families actually need.

Focus on the Basics

Cities can play an important role in helping kinship caregivers, foster families, and youth leaving foster care access public benefits and services, including SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, housing assistance, and workforce supports. Helping families meet these basic needs can reduce crises and improve outcomes for children and young people. By serving as trusted connectors, cities can help ensure families receive the resources they need to remain stable and prevent crises from escalating.

While mayors and practitioners shared a strong commitment to prevention, collaboration, and supporting families, the discussion also revealed distinct perspectives shaped by their different roles and experiences. Municipal leaders tended to focus on system-level issues such as cross-agency coordination, partnerships, data, and resource alignment. Practitioners and community representatives focused more on the challenges families face directly, including service gaps, workforce burnout, kinship supports, and the needs of youth and caregivers. Together, these perspectives highlight the need for both strong systems and strong community supports to improve outcomes for children and families.

Additional City Spotlights

Every city is different. There is no single approach that will work everywhere. But cities can act in various ways. Below are a few examples by participants of the NLC foster care convening:

In **Mount Vernon, New York**, city leaders are leveraging prevention strategies, adoption efforts, Continuum of Care funding, and housing vouchers to support youth exiting foster care and strengthen family stability. The city's approach to resident well-being looks beyond addressing individual challenges in isolation and instead considers how policies, systems, and community conditions work together to shape outcomes.*

In **Frederick, Maryland**, child welfare services are administered by the Frederick County Department of Social Services, while city leaders and programs such as Frederick's Reengagement Center Initiative, housed within the City of Frederick's Office of Opportunity & Innovation in the Mayor's Office, work alongside county agencies and community partners to support families through prevention, housing, public safety, and other local initiatives.

The **City of Alexandria, Virginia** supports foster youth and families through the Fund for Alexandria's Child, which helps with basic needs, youth transitioning from foster care, and children placed with relatives.[6]

In **Lauderhill, Florida**, city leaders are exploring a place-based approach to foster care that engages HBCUs, faith communities, civic organizations, and community partners to strengthen support for foster youth and families. Lauderhill is also served by ChildNet Broward, the lead agency for foster care and adoption services in Broward County, which recruits foster families and supports children and youth involved in the child welfare system.

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* National League of Cities, Cities of Opportunity Mayors' Institute; National League of Cities, Stories of Opportunity: Mount Vernon, NY (2023); https://www.nlc.org/article/2023/08/16/stories-of-opportunity-mount-vernon-ny/

Opportunities for Prevention & Transformation Initiative

The OPT-In for Families initiative, launched by the Doris Duke Foundation, is a national initiative that helps communities redesign child welfare systems around prevention rather than investigation and family separation. This approach is connecting families to community-based services and direct supports before challenges escalate into child welfare system involvement. Launched in 2024, the three-year initiative supports demonstration sites in Washington, D.C., Kentucky, Oregon, and South Carolina.[7]

What Can a Mayor Do First?

Cities do not need to run the foster care system to make a difference. Because the challenges are fragmented across systems, mayors are uniquely positioned to convene partners and ask a few key questions to ensure family well-being strategies are aligned with child welfare goals:

- What are the biggest challenges facing families in our community?
- Where are families having trouble getting help?
- What resources does the city already have that could help?
- Which partners need to be involved?
- How can young people and families help shape solutions?
- Where can we better connect the services we already have?
- How can we work with state and county partners to fill gaps?

The goal is not to create another system. It is to make better use of the resources and partnerships already available in the community and consider whether investments in housing, early childhood, youth programs, behavioral health, workforce development, and family support are meeting community needs.

From the Field

NLC's foster care convening builds on growing national efforts to engage mayors in child and family well-being, including work supported by Casey Family Programs with local leaders in cities such as Gary, Birmingham, and Jackson.[8] Cities can test new ideas, build partnerships, and expand approaches that are working. Sometimes it means connecting existing resources in a better way or bringing the right partners together around a shared problem.

NLC's Cities of Opportunity initiative offers a tested municipal framework for putting these actions into practice by helping cities address complex challenges through a well-being lens rather than through individual programs or systems in isolation.

In **Montgomery, Alabama**, Cities of Opportunity helped support a more coordinated approach to neighborhood well-being by bringing together nearly 25 partners across education, healthcare, housing, faith communities, and other sectors. Through a cradle-to-college strategy, the city worked to align resources around the needs of children, families, and neighborhoods—illustrating how municipal leadership can connect systems and partners around shared outcomes.

Across more than 100 participating cities, the initiative has helped local leaders align departments, community partners, and resources around the physical, mental, social, and economic conditions that shape resident well-being. Those lessons can inform how cities strengthen prevention and support for children, youth, and families affected by foster care.

Conclusion

Foster care involvement is often a symptom of broader challenges that affect city budgets, including housing instability, behavioral health needs, workforce disruptions, and youth homelessness. By investing in prevention, kinship care, family support services, benefits access, and other upstream supports, cities can help families remain stable and reduce the need for costly interventions.

While every community's role will look different, the opportunity is the same – moving from responding to family crises to preventing them. Through coordinated leadership and cross-sector partnerships, mayors can help ensure children and families receive the support they need before challenges become crises.



RESOURCES

Cities of Opportunity

- What Works: How Cities are Building Health and Wellbeing Through the Cities of Opportunity Framework
- How Cities Can Redefine Progress Toward Equity for Wellbeing

Doris Duke Foundation

- Opportunities for Prevention & Transformation Initiative (OPT-In)
- OPT-IN Brochure (July 2026)

Kinnect

- www.Kinnect.org
- Kinnect Overview Brochure (2026)





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Finally, NLC thanks the survey respondents and participants in the *Reimagining Local Support for Foster Youth* convening for their time and thoughtful contributions and is especially grateful to the participating city leaders for openly sharing their experiences and their commitment to improving outcomes for children, youth, and families in their communities.

Learn more about NLC's foster care convening and survey.

Learn more about NLC's Cities of Opportunity Initiative.



Endnotes

1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, The AFCARS Dashboard (Print Version): Preliminary FFY 2024 Estimates (Washington, DC: HHS, 2025), 1, https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/2024-afcars-dashboard-printable.pdf

2 Christian Alliance for Orphans (CAFO), U.S. Foster Care Statistics 2026: Data & Trends (updated May 27, 2026), https://cafo.org/foster-care-statistics/. Statistics compiled from AFCARS data.

3 Mark E. Courtney, Amy Dworsky, et al., Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 26, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago (2011), https://www.chapinhall.org/research/midwest-evaluation-of-the-adult-functioning-of-former-foster-youth/; Amy Dworsky et al., "Homelessness During the Transition From Foster Care to Adulthood," American Journal of Public Health 103, no. S2 (2013): S318–S323, https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301455.

4 Mattie Mackenzie-Liu, Mattie and Pergamit, Michael (October 2023), Urban Institute, "Does Supportive Housing Improve Long-Term Housing and Economic Stability for Child Welfare-Involved Families?", https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/Does%20Supportive%20Housing%20Improve%20Long-Term%20Housing%20and%20Economic%20Stability%20for%20Child%20Welfare-Involved%20Families.pdf.

5 Please refer to the following resources for more information: NYC: FY23 Foster Care Five Year Plan Progress Report, https://www.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/data-analysis/2023/progress-report-fy23.pdf; and Los Angeles: DCFS website, https://dcfs.lacounty.gov/the-number-of-children-in-los-angeles-county-foster-care-has-plunged-the-imprint-set-out-to-discover-why/

6 Alexandria, The Fund for Alexandria's Child, https://www.alexandriava.gov/TheFundForAlexChild

7 Doris Duke Foundation, Opportunities for Prevention & Transformation Initiative (OPT-In for Families), https://www.dorisduke.org/grants/projects/opportunities-for-prevention-and-transformation-initiative-

8 Casey Family Programs. https://www.casey.org/who-we-are/



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